

## Children's responses to grief

Children experience the same kind of feelings of grief as adults do, but they may show it differently. Nothing can prepare a child for how they may respond to grief. It may affect them physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

The following reactions are normal and a part of the healing process:

- ❑ behaving younger than they are (thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, tantrums, clingy behaviour...)
- ❑ risk taking behaviours
- ❑ getting into trouble
- ❑ moping around
- ❑ being withdrawn
- ❑ physical symptoms e.g. headaches, pains, stomach aches
- ❑ being passive
- ❑ acting as if nothing has happened
- ❑ being aggressive
- ❑ being anxious or scared
- ❑ difficulty in concentrating
- ❑ change in appearance / attitude
- ❑ crying
- ❑ changes to sleep and eating patterns

## Growing up with grief

A child may never stop missing a loved one. The pain may gradually decrease and allow the child to grow with the loss. As the child develops they may feel the loss in different ways. Past losses may be re-visited with a new loss.

If you are concerned about a child's grief response professional help may be needed.

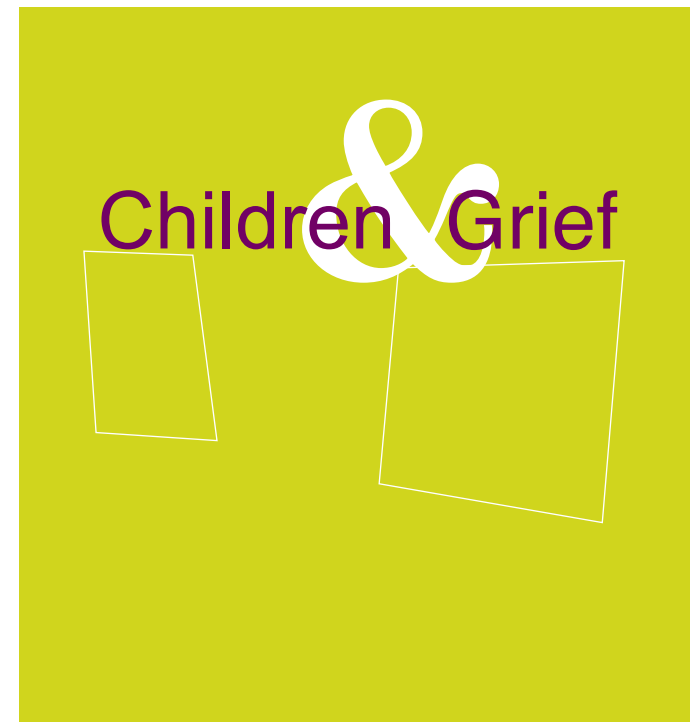
**National Association for Loss and Grief (NALAG)**  
Phone: (02) 8230 1527 or (02) 6882 9222  
<http://www.griefaustralia.org/>

**Healthlink 1800 063 635**

**Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800**

HUNTER NEW ENGLAND  
NSW HEALTH

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# Grief

Grief is a normal reaction to loss. Children (even babies) frequently understand more about loss than adults give them credit for. Losses may be the result of death but also when parents separate, friends move away, a pet dies, or they move house or school.

Grieving is a process that may take a very long time and cannot be hurried. Each child will express their grief in their own way and this will be influenced by their age. The loss experienced by a child is often also experienced by their family and friends. Some children grieve openly from the start; there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Most children's grief can be managed with appropriate family, community and cultural support.

## Grieving children need:

- To feel safe.
- To have their feelings acknowledged.
- To be allowed to grieve in their own time and in their own way.

# How to help - some ideas to consider

- Listen and help them understand that grieving is normal.
- Don't judge the child's responses or beliefs.
- Give permission to grieve and encourage them to share feelings.
- Encourage the child to express their grief in words, play, music, art...
- Be available.
- Give comfort appropriate to their needs (hugs, midnight chats, kicking a ball together...)
- Be patient and prepared to discuss what happened over and over again. This is important for very young children.
- Let the child be a child.
- Often children believe they caused or contributed to the loss and feel guilty. Be reassuring and explain that the loss is not the child's fault.
- A child's honesty can be confronting. Try to answer their questions honestly in a way they can understand. The words "death" or "loss" need to be used.
- Talk about the person who has died by name.
- Help the child(ren) to remember the funny, happy and ordinary times as well.
- When dealing with death a memory box or book may be useful.
- Don't try to hide grief from child(ren). This helps them to understand that grieving is a normal reaction.

## If you are grieving too:

- Avoid seeking support from your child(ren) in order to help you cope better.
- Seek assistance from people that your child(ren) respect to be special supports for them.
- Seek support to help you through your own grief.

